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ABSTRACT

The different learning abilities of senior citizens and ways that older students can successfully maximize their learning effort in a class essentially designed for younger learners are discussed. Because of a regressed transformational drill behavior, the pedagogical hypothesis and the teaching strategy must de-emphasize a consistent audiolingual method which stresses repetitive practice of oral patterns and word sequences. In continuing education language classes with a number of aging learners, a compromise audiolingual program must be instituted but not at the expense of the basic objective of speech. The elderly learner is particularly strong on structural features and lexical items, but he cannot as quickly discriminate and imitate pronunciation accuracy. Research on the learning capacity of the elderly is cited. (SW)

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LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR AGEING STUDENTS

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The age composition of post-industrial societies is at present undergoing a dramatic modification, and the anticipated increase of the population of senior citizens will of necessity generate new educational developments. Social planners simply can no longer afford to ignore the educational needs of the growing number of ageing people.

The United States is rapidly becoming one of the world's older populations. It has been estimated that by the year 2005 more than one-half of the population will be over fifty years of age. Even a cursory look at the statistics on ageing indicates the tremendous growth that can be anticipated in the older age group during the next quarter century. In 1975 about 22 million, or slightly over 10 per cent of the population, were 65 years of age or older; by the year 2000 this figure is predicted to reach nearly 30 million. Every day approximately 4000 Americans turn 65. Every day approximately 3000 Americans die. The net increase is about 1000 per day or 365,000 per year. (1)

Most teachers in post-high school education have heard prospective or actual students of foreign languages saying "I am really too old to learn a foreign language". This learning apprehension is reinforced by the presence in the classroom of predominantly young students, both in adult education and university language courses. The pretext of advanced age impeding the acquisition of a second language seems to represent the most symptomatic obstacle for mature learners, although the experienced teacher knows that chronological age in itself cannot really be equated with drastically reduced learning abilities.

Although lifelong education is now universally acknowledged as a principle and way of life, people still emphasize that education is a process aimed at training the young until the individual reaches an age where he can play a fully productive part in society. Students of retiring age, thus aged 60 and over, have been enrolling for years in university courses and adult education classes but to date their proportionate representation has remained insignificant and unchanged. A higher life expectancy with improved standards of living and a greater mobility has not led, as one would assume, to an increased enrolment in language courses. Between 2% and 3% of all students enrolled in the IML belong to this age group. (2) There are a number of specialized learning programmes for senior citizens including some few language programmes, but within the framework of this project such regular language courses for ageing students are not discussed. Language teaching in Australia as elsewhere is essentially focussed on adolescent learners and young adults, and a new interest in foreign language teaching to children is being developed during this decade. Elderly adults must fit into teaching patterns for the young if they wish to receive high level language instruction, and course programmes and books cater exclusively for the majority age group, namely the young adult. Ideally, teaching programmes should be designed which also cater for the specific needs and interests of ageing learners but in the immediate future

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the mature students joining younger learners will need to join foreign language courses which are intended for students who recently completed their high school education.

The biggest obstacle for learners in later years, as stipulated in the introduction, is the largely erroneous belief that one is too old to learn a foreign language. This invisible barrier also obstructs the age group between 40 and 60, representing 22% to 26% of annual IML enrolments, and it can be asserted that the fear of an age barrier for foreign language acquisition prevents a large number of prospective mature age group students from successful participation in language courses. Drs. Harwood and Naylor, two psychologists at Queensland University, commenced an active research project in 1965, popularly known as Operation Retirement. As part of this project, an experimental German language course was given to ageing students with no previous knowledge of that language. The IML provided some teaching expertise for the course and at the end of six months tuition students were tested:

Of 55 who took the final test, 38 passed at the Senior (Leaving) school examination level, seven with A passes. Seven did not achieve the level of the Junior examination. The remainder were graded as Intermediate. The examination was confined to translation from German into English.(3)

This study of language acquisition conducted by Harwood and Naylor researched a variety of problems associated with growing older - motivation, intellectual curiosity, social interaction, rehabilitation, reactivation, self identification, mental health and other geriatric aspects, but for our purposes the findings relating to the classroom performance by the students are of greatest relevance. Harwood and Naylor disproved the commonly held belief that retired people are too old for learning:

...comparative studies have been made which have shown up the differences in performance between young adults (presumed to be at their best) and ageing groups in the seventh to tenth decades. It has been shown that the older groups of normal adults, when compared with young persons whose over-all mental function is of the same level, actually have the advantage over their juniors in their store of general information, their level of comprehension of social situations and in the extent of their vocabulary and understanding of words. These strengths are invaluable, especially since failing physical strength need not interfere with their function. On the other side, the older people are at a disadvantage when faced with tasks demanding co-ordination of hand and eye and solution of problems involving shapes and spatial relations. In other words, the intellectual weaknesses of the aged show up more in novel problem-solving than in verbal manipulation of stored memories.(4)

The level of perception and memory in old students is obviously reduced but these senior citizens are still capable of new learning. As a result of successful completion of the prolonged German course of Operation Retirement, a number of students in their late sixties successfully transferred to more demanding language study in the

university degree departments and in the IML. The learning strength of people growing older lies in verbal behaviour; although their rate of acceptance of new information is slower, they may derive even some advantage from the large pool of experience some of the young learners may not be able to draw from. It is of course a well established fact that mental deterioration is accelerated by disuse and by lack of stimulation, and teachers of adult education classes are well aware that after a long interval of educational idleness mature students can rejoin the more demanding educational facilities only with the greatest difficulty, and, in the case of not having experienced previous foreign language learning, it is highly unlikely that they can continue beyond the first few weeks.

A considerable amount of research has been undertaken over the last decade to clarify the "educability" of the elderly. The practical and theoretical implications of this comparatively new research area of educational receptivity of older people is accentuated by the increase in the number of people of retiring age who would be highly suited for present adult education class work and in some cases they could even follow a degree curriculum. French universities expanded in recent years into specialized courses for retired graduates who wanted to update their skills and continue within the process of lifelong education.

Last year Geneva University also introduced such courses for retired graduates, and apart from a humanitarian and educational justification of such programmes, economic considerations promote such pedagogic ventures because continued intellectual activity does reduce the need for care and social service of those growing older. One of the best known early research projects was conducted by Suzanne Pacaud, 1965, who surveyed 6,000 employees of the SNCF French Federal Railways, and the main findings of this pioneer project were that the learning abilities of the people were conserved by continued mental exercise. Not only the intellectually gifted retain the ability to learn, but all those who had consistently received mental stimuli in the process of lifelong education.(5)

Some few years ago the learning ability of an ageing female student came to my attention, who on her retirement had enrolled for an elementary IML course. This lady was moderately well educated, but to my astonishment she had had no previous experience with foreign language learning. Four years later her ability to read and write and her oral proficiency were similar to, if not better than, that of the average language major at university pass degree level. She would, on her own, read poems, plays and novels and her aesthetic appreciation of fiction read in the foreign language was quite considerable. At the age of about 70, this lady was still exceptionally alert and perceptive and although she was easily the oldest in the group of learners, the students, as well as the teacher, could always rely on her as linguistically the most resourceful student. The students even accepted her unobtrusive leadership in language work, particularly when undertaking translations, although as a leader for social interaction she did not appear as strong as one of her young counterparts. It was also quite obvious that this exceptional student had difficulties with novel problems and with audio-visual teaching aids, but the verbal manipulations of recently stored memories seemed to be little different from those of younger students. Her perception and acquisition of phonological features presenting specific difficulties for native speakers of English,

such as the two different versions of pronunciation of German 'ch', took considerably longer than with younger students. When she mastered the more difficult phonological component of the language, her abilities at encoding and decoding were in no way inferior to the better students in the class. It must be admitted, however, that an exceptionally strong motivation assisted this ageing student in the process of foreign language study. The fact that this learner excelled in the comprehension of written language characterises a special area of aptitude of later year learners, and I have met few students in adult education who on completion of several years' study have attained a better reading competence in a foreign language than this lady who started her first language course at 65.

A survey conducted with IML students in 1977 showed that almost 14% of all students had not taken a foreign language at high school. This figure is alarming if you consider that high level adult education courses usually attract mainly students from the more privileged socio-economic strata, and between 25% and 32% of IML students are university graduates. Students who have undertaken foreign language study at school are much more likely to enrol in language courses in continuing education than students who have a monolingual school background. The absence of previous experience with learning a foreign language is a major handicap for all prospective learners, and even part time language students who are at the peak of their professional career fall victim of the 'old-age syndrome' which is, in actuality, an educational gap which should have been filled at school. Senior citizens are particularly vulnerable if they have not previously studied a language, and in most cases they drop out of the course because they think that their advanced age is solely responsible for their inadequate classroom performance. The only possible safeguard against such educational deficiencies could be formulated by making foreign language study a compulsory school subject.

THE OLDER STUDENT IN THE CLASSROOM

We have already discussed the main learning feature for senior citizens as not being a question of age but one of environment and experience. The problems in the classroom encountered by middle aged part time students are really quite similar. The modern teaching strategy is accentuated by group learning and the difference of educational background and professional experience of the course participants needs to be directed to this common purpose. Individual language learning success and the feeling of social belonging are often interlinked. The more mature students' expectations are usually based on previous foreign language learning. These learning experiences often recall the passive and authoritarian classroom. Today, foreign language acquisition is psychologically linked to personal action in a group, and this very tenet of modern methodology creates anxiety for some older students. They are not used to an oral/aural method which relies from the beginning on active participation as an essential ingredient of the learning process. Every group of learners will therefore work out its behaviour. Experienced language teachers know very well how unpredictable individuals are in such a new group situation. On the whole the response of the younger students is far more spontaneous and is expressed with greater ease, whereas older adults often excel at written grammar-based exercises and at translations from the target language. It is often not age in itself which gives the younger students an advantage over the more mature learner, but rather the

different type of teaching experience he is acquainted with, and, in many cases, younger students have not interrupted their learning process.

Senior citizens, like all other learners, suffer from being grouped with a number of students whose linguistic level is well above the class average. In continuing education the classification of learners according to previous experience in the target language is always one of the most complex and baffling pedagogic problems, particularly as students are permitted to choose their own class level. More advanced individuals are likely to set the tone in the classroom, and even a well experienced teacher can often not avoid older students interpreting their own relatively poor performance as a handicap of age when measured against these more advanced students. In IML elementary language courses of the so-called 'popular' languages like French and German, usually more than half of all the students are not true beginners; some have usually studied the language at school for two or three years though perhaps not with a slant on oral communicative skills. At times, even students with an impressive number of university credit points in the relevant language discipline enrol in continuing education at elementary level. True beginners, particularly when advanced in age, feel threatened by the seemingly more intelligent younger students who act as if they had a very quick grasp of the foreign language, when in actuality they simply express, to the detriment of other learners, a previously acquired skill. In present conditions this most fundamental problem of language teaching in continuing education cannot be remedied.

METHODS IN TEACHING TECHNIQUES

No specific considerations can at present be given to the vast majority of elderly persons taking languages in continuing education and in degree departments. In adult education there seems to be a heavier concentration of these students in European languages like French, German and Italian, and they rarely enrol in non-Indo-European languages. In continuing education courses with several senior citizens in the classroom the teacher ought to partially adjust the programme to their needs. From the beginning the teacher must encourage the creation of a good atmosphere of social interaction and the jargon associated with foreign language instruction and esoteric grammatical terms needs to be avoided. In the language laboratory the confidence of the younger students is often not shared by older learners. The mature student is often bewildered when confronted with the gadgetry of language laboratory equipment, and, on occasions, for that very reason, we provide a special assistant for the first lessons in the language laboratory. It must be admitted, nevertheless, that on account of the wider use of electronic equipment the fear of technological apparatus has somewhat been reduced. The older student usually feels reassured when he is told that the equipment is "foolproof" and that the recorded programmes cannot be wiped.

It is not my intention to discuss in detail the learning progress of older students in the language laboratory but it seems that they benefit far more from the more traditional, if not formalist, classroom approach. The rate of perception and the absorption of new information is reduced in ageing students. They require more

time and smaller quantities of new materials at a time. If they can borrow the programmed language tape for playback at home - the IML has these facilities available in most languages - repetition and feedback will reinforce their progress. In this event the audio-lingual programme, the language tape, can play a major role in developing the cognitive skills of the mature learner and serve at the same time as a memory aid. The training in active communicative behaviour cannot be promoted with equal success. Young learners adopt more readily electronically recorded models of linguistic transference and apply them for active communication. The Direct Method of language instruction is not particularly well suited for older students and audio-visual or audio-lingual programmes which de-emphasize early use of the written language ought to be avoided. We have been conducting a number of audio-lingual and audio-visual courses where the written language was hardly ever introduced. To my knowledge no retired people ever enrolled for these programmes, but the very absence of older learners in these courses may point to the general preference by ageing learners for book-based courses. Elderly learners appreciate a systematic presentation and expect to learn rules and regulations. They also wish to follow a text book page by page. Language variations confuse them and cannot be explained to them as easily as to a younger student. Limited translation and *précis* work should be encouraged in order to give them a sense of progress and to reassure them. Students must always be informed of the teaching techniques being used and grammatical structures should in no way function as an end in themselves, but rather as a means to something else. A consideration of a partial formalist approach, i.e. with emphasis on grammar and translation, is of course a largely passive teaching method, and as the students progress more emphasis can be placed on oral skills.

The relationship between age and language learning abilities of senior citizens and that of young adults is far less pronounced when we compare second language learning of children with second language learning by adults. Children learn through a process of identification and they can make use of a phonemic system which they had evolved in the development of speech in the mother tongue. Young children's learning experience is "midway between second language learning by adults, which is notoriously difficult, and first language learning by children, which is virtually effortless." (6) Academic learning in other fields, or intellectual brainpower, is little indication for easy foreign language acquisition for adults, and often elderly students have the linguistic aptitude, imagination and patience to undertake language study along with much younger students. Senior citizens usually respond more slowly. They do not have the quick grasp of drill dialogue memorizing which often results in trial-and-error fumbling. Their response through the medium of writing is often substantially better. Mature age students between 40 and 60 who seem to be weaker oral performers usually present excellent written responses and exercises. In adult education this age group is often the most accomplished when considering written responses, and this ability would arise from increased experience, strong motivation and perhaps an emotional reaction peculiar to later year students.

In the context of this paper emphasis was placed on the recognition of the different learning abilities of senior citizens and how these older students can successfully maximise their learning

effort in a class situation which is essentially designed for younger learners. No attempt was made at a psycholinguistic analysis of the process of foreign language acquisition by ageing people. It was shown, however, that on account of a regressed transformational drill behaviour the pedagogical hypothesis and the teaching strategy must de-emphasize a consistent audio-lingual method which stresses repetitive practice of oral patterns and word sequences. In continuing education language classes with a number of ageing learners, a compromise audio-lingual programme must be instituted, however, not at the expense of the basic objective of speech. The elderly learner is particularly strong on structural features and lexical items, whereas he cannot as quickly discriminate and imitate pronunciation accuracy. Linguistics can provide valuable assistance because it clarifies the relationship between spoken and written language. Ultimately, neither the process of second language acquisition nor the expected level of competence can be scientifically categorized, because the adult as well as the child can only attain the objective he is willing and able to attain. Some older adults can master a foreign language without resorting to grammar or linguistic analysis. There is no doubt, however, that sharing a learning experience with younger students is a challenge and is rewarding to senior citizens and in many cases the participation of these older students can enrich the learning process of the young.

NOTES

1. AAAE Newsletter, August 1977, "Education for Aging (sic) - Imperative for the Future", from Adult Leadership, April 1977.
2. In 1971, 1974 and 1977 surveys were conducted with IML (short form of Institute of Modern Languages, an adult education extension of the University of Queensland) students enrolled in regular foreign language courses, excluding English as a Second Language and "Aboriginal" language courses. All statistical data in the paper is derived from these surveys.

Number of respondents:	1971	1001
	1974	513
	1977	876

<u>Years of Age</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>
17 - 25	43%	31%	39%
26 - 40	29%	40%	35%
41 - 60	26%	23%	22%
over 60	2%	3%	2%
no answer	0%	2%	1%

3. Harwood, E., "The Learning Capacities of the Ageing", *Social Services*, Vol. 22, No. 5.
4. Harwood, E., & Naylor, G.F.K., "Some Thoughts on Memory", *Growing Older*, 1973.
5. The Project by Suzanne Pacaud, 1965, is briefly discussed in: Naylor, G.F.K., "Theoretical and Practical Implications of 'Educability' in the Elderly". Paper presented at Conference on Ageing, Auckland, March 1974.
6. Dale, P.S., *Language Development - Structure and Function*, 2nd ed., New York 1976, p.38.